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SERVING FOLLOWERS AND FAMILY? A TRICKLE-DOWN MODEL OF HOW SERVANT LEADERSHIP SHAPES EMPLOYEE WORK PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

So far, little research attention has been given to the effects of servant leadership displayed by leaders across an organization's hierarchy. Using a matched sample of employees and their supervisors from three companies in the Dominican Republic, multilevel structural equation modeling results show that manager servant leadership trickles down to inspire supervisor servant leadership, which increases employee prosocial motivation and subsequent work performance. Furthermore, supervisor family motivation buffered the trickle-down mechanism, so that the effect on employee work performance is weaker for supervisors with high levels of family motivation. Our research sheds light on how and when servant leadership trickles down to shape employee work performance.

INTRODUCTION

Despite considerable servant leadership research in over three decades (see Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, van Dierendonck, & Liden, 2019 for a systematic review), questions remain with regards to *how* and *when* the display of servant leadership makes positive contributions in organizations and promotes the effectiveness of its members. Here, our study makes two primary contributions. First, we delineate the role of supervisor servant leadership and employee prosocial motives as linchpins between manager servant leadership and employee work performance. In integrating different hierarchical levels, we contribute to recent debates on whether servant leadership displayed by managers or supervisors has the most crucial influence on facilitating employee work performance (e.g., Peterson et al., 2012 for the impact of higher-level managers; Chiniara & Bentein, 2015, 2018; Hu & Liden, 2011 for the impact of mid-level supervisors). Second, we contribute to the growing literature on the effects of leaders' prosocial motives on employees (e.g., Frazier & Tupper, 2018; Shao, Cardona, Ng, & Trau, 2017) by introducing a leader's family motivation as a relevant contingency factor for when servant leadership trickles down in organizations. We scrutinize the joint effects of supervisors' willingness to serve their employees as well as their family. In so doing, we aim to explore the *not-so-bright* side of family motivation in line with recent debates (Bergeron, 2007; Bolino & Grant, 2016) as well as empirical research (Lin et al., 2017; Rofcanin, de Jong, Las Heras, & Kim, 2018) on how a 'concern for others' may come at a cost.

A Trickle-Down Model of Servant Leadership and Employee Work Performance

The premise of trickle-down models is that the perceptions, attitudes, or behavior of one individual in an organization (usually a leader) affects the perceptions, attitudes, or behavior of other individuals (usually followers; Wo, Ambrose, & Schminke, 2015). A recent integrative review distinguishes between homeomorphic (in which the construct remains the same throughout the trickle-down process) and heteromorphic (in which the construct varies) trickle-down effects (Wo, Schminke, & Ambrose, in press). In the following, we delineate how a heteromorphic trickle-down mechanism initiated by managerial servant leadership could affect both supervisors and employees across hierarchical organizational levels (i.e., higher level managers, mid-level supervisors, and lower-level employees). For mid-level supervisors, we argue that role modeling higher-level managers makes them more likely to adopt servant leadership with regards to their own lower-level employees (Bolino & Grant, 2016; Brief & Motowidlo, 1986). Guided by this logic, mid-level supervisors are likely to mimic the encouraging and considerate leadership practices of their higher-level managers to the end of adapting their own leadership style (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; Wood & Bandura, 1989), thus displaying servant leadership to their respective lower-level employees as well (Liden et al., 2008; van Dierendonck, 2011).

H1: Manager servant leadership is positively related to supervisor servant leadership.

For lower-level employees, we suggest that the exposure to mid-level supervisor servant leadership enhances their prosocial motivation because servant leadership encourages a concern for oneself and others (van Dierendonck, 2011), which is inherently linked to prosocial motivation (De Dreu, Nijstad, & van Knippenberg, 2008; Grant, 2008a).

H2: Supervisor servant leadership is positively related to employee prosocial motivation.

We further suggest that lower-level employee prosocial motivation augments their work performance because such motivation should drive other-focused behaviors that elicit better performance evaluations from supervisors as well as greater cooperation and reciprocity among coworkers (Bolino, 1999; Grant, Parker, & Collins, 2009; Hu & Liden, 2015).

H3: Employee prosocial motivation is positively related to employee work performance

Combining Hypotheses 1-3, we propose a trickle-down model of servant leadership across hierarchical levels of an organization (i.e., higher-level managers, mid-level supervisors, and lower-level employees).

H4: Supervisor servant leadership and employee prosocial motivation sequentially mediate the positive relationship between manager servant leadership and employee work performance.

The Moderated Mediating Role of Supervisor Family Motivation

Drawing on the principles of role motivation theory (Miner, 1993), we argue that the beneficial effects of supervisor servant leadership for employee prosocial motivation might not be as strong when the supervisor is highly motivated to work in order to benefit his or her family. We suggest that a supervisor's family motivation as a motive pattern conflicts with the expectations of the role of a servant leader, and thus may play a role in how servant leadership is perceived by employees with consequences for their own prosocial motivation. As a result, in situations when supervisors actually display servant leader behaviors to employees, they may be perceived as unreliable and should thus be less effective in facilitating employees' prosocial motivation.

H5: Supervisor family motivation moderates the sequential mediation of manager servant leadership on employee work performance via supervisor servant leadership and employee prosocial motivation, such that the serial mediation effect is weaker for supervisors with high family motivation and stronger for supervisors with low family motivation.

METHOD

Sample and Data Collection

We collected data from supervisor-employee dyads from the under-studied context of the Dominican Republic in 2017. Study participants were full-time employees of three organizations from different industries. For data collection, we used online surveys administered in Spanish and back-translated survey items to maintain conceptual equivalence between the original instruments (in English) and the Spanish versions (Brislin, 1980). We received 155 usable matched responses (155 employees and 84 supervisors). The supervisor sample consisted of 43 men and 41 women with mean age of 40.78 years ($SD = 7.78$). The employee sample consisted of 72 men and 83 women with a mean age of 34.55 ($SD = 8.19$).

Measures

All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1= *strongly disagree* to 7= *strongly agree*).

Perceived manager servant leadership. Supervisors rated their perceptions of their manager's servant leadership using a seven-item servant leadership scale by Liden et al. (2014; $\alpha = .88$).

Perceived supervisor servant leadership. Employees rated their perceptions of their supervisor's servant leadership using Liden et al.'s (2014; $\alpha = .88$) servant leadership scale.

Employee prosocial motivation. Employees rated their prosocial motivation by completing a four-item scale developed by Grant (2008a; $\alpha = .88$).

Supervisor-rated employee work performance. Supervisors rated the work performance of their employees using a four-items scale by Williams and Anderson (1991; $\alpha = .94$).

Supervisor family motivation. Supervisors rated their own levels of family motivation using a five-item scale by Menges et al. (2017; $\alpha = .89$).

Control variables. We controlled for employees' work-family conflict using a three-item scale by Matthews, Kath, and Barnes-Farrell (2010; $\alpha = .80$), employee levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation using single items (Grant & Berry, 2011), supervisor and employee gender (coded 0 = male, 1 = female), age, number of children, and company membership.

Analytical Strategy

Because of our nested data structure (i.e., employees at Level 1 were nested within supervisors at Level 2), we tested our hypotheses using multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM; see Preacher, Zyphur, & Zhang, 2010 for recommendations). We group-mean centered Level 1 predictors and control variables and grand-mean centered Level 2 predictors and control variables (Preacher et al., 2010). Using MSEM, we fitted two two-level models (i.e., a serial mediation model and a moderated serial mediation model). Model 1 simultaneously tested the individual multilevel mediation paths proposed by Hypotheses 1-3 as well as the multilevel serial mediation model proposed by Hypothesis 4. In Model 2, we tested Hypothesis 5 that implies multilevel moderated serial mediation. We tested Hypothesis 4 and 5 by constructing confidence intervals around the product term of the (moderated) serial mediation paths using the Monte Carlo method (Preacher & Selig, 2012). The (moderated) serial mediation effect is significant if the Monte Carlo confidence interval does not contain zero (Bauer et al., 2006; Preacher & Selig, 2012).

RESULTS

As the ICC(1) for employee work performance was .21, the use of multilevel modeling was necessary to analyze our data (Snijders & Bosker, 2012).

Hypothesis Tests

Supporting Hypothesis 1-4, we found a positive relationship between manager's servant leadership and supervisor's servant leadership ($\gamma = 0.27$, $SE = .11$, $t = 2.56$; $p < .05$), a positive association between supervisor's servant leadership and employee's prosocial motivation ($\gamma = 0.16$, $SE = .05$, $t = 3.13$; $p < .01$), and a positive relationship between employee's prosocial motivation and employee's work performance ($\gamma = 1.33$, $SE = .33$, $t = 3.98$; $p < .001$). Furthermore, we showed that a positive relationship between manager's servant leadership and employee's work performance is serially mediated by supervisor's servant leadership and employee's prosocial motivation ($\gamma = 0.06$, 95% CI Low = 0.01; CI High = 0.13). We then moved on to test the moderated serial mediation model proposed by Hypothesis 5 by adding an interaction term between the between-portion of supervisor's servant leadership and supervisor's family motivation to a model predicting the between-portion of employee's prosocial motivation. The interaction term proved to be statistically significant ($\gamma = -0.09$, $SE = .04$, $t = -2.58$; $p < .05$). In line with our expectations, simple slope tests (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006) revealed a stronger positive relationship between supervisor's servant leadership and employee's prosocial motivation for supervisors with low (-1 SD below the mean; $\gamma = 0.83$, $SE = .28$, $t = 3.00$; $p < .01$), as opposed to high ($+1$ SD above the mean; $\gamma = 0.63$, $SE = .20$, $t = 3.13$; $p < .01$) levels of family motivation. This suggests that supervisor's family motivation buffers the positive effect of servant leadership on employee's prosocial motivation. In addition, MSEM results revealed a significant moderated serial mediation effect of family motivation on the relation between manager's servant leadership and employee's work performance via supervisor's servant leadership and

employee's prosocial motivation with a stronger positive relationship for supervisors with low (-1 *SD* below the mean; $\gamma = 0.28$, 95% CI Low = 0.03; CI High = 0.60), as opposed to high ($+1$ *SD* above the mean; $\gamma = 0.21$, 95% CI Low = 0.02; CI High = 0.45) levels of family motivation.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our findings extend previous research and theorizing concerning servant leadership as well as prosociality. Our trickle-down model tests a key prediction of servant leadership theory originally advanced by Greenleaf (1997), that is, whether servant leadership turns followers into servants themselves. Specifically, our study demonstrated that managerial servant leadership influences organizational members across hierarchical levels and that this influence manifests in two ways – by inspiring servant leadership of supervisors and by increasing the prosocial motivation and work performance of employees through their respective supervisors. From a prosociality angle, we demonstrated a double-edged sword nature of family motivation in showing that the positive association between supervisors' servant leadership and employees' prosocial motivation weakens for highly family motivated supervisors. Practically, our finding that managerial servant leadership trickles down and influences employee work performance ought to make managers aware of the importance of displaying servant leadership to supervisors with the aim of creating a ripple effect throughout their organization and boosting performance outcomes. To encourage the trickle-down mechanism between managers and supervisors, we recommend that organizations design and implement training programs to promote servant leadership across all leadership levels (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014). Furthermore, our findings that high family motivation does not only diminish the positive effects of supervisor servant leadership, but also buffers the indirect effect of manager servant leadership on employee work performance offers implications for organizational practice. Accordingly, organizations should consider introducing work-family balance initiatives especially for direct supervisors with very frequent employee interactions to highlight how to successfully integrate work life with family life with a view to mitigate the likely conflict between family and work interests of highly family motivated servant leaders and ensure optimal levels of employee work performance.

Conclusion

Despite considerable research efforts highlighting the benefits of servant leadership for organizational effectiveness, researchers and practitioners had little insight into how and under which conditions servant leadership displayed by leaders across hierarchical levels of an organization affects the effectiveness of its members. Our research demonstrates that manager behaviors have an extended reach and not only influence their direct reports, but act through them, and affect the work performance of employees at lower levels of an organization's hierarchy.

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